PATTERNS OF POWER · AN ESSAY

The Architect Phase

Every durable hierarchy was once a construction site: a floor poured by violence, a word fitted over it from the materials at hand, and a tension between the builders of each installed at the foundation. ISIS is the one founding caught in its own files — and the Sassanids are the proof of what three hundred years does to the blueprints

Thomas J. Bryan

with Claude (Anthropic)

2026

PATTERNS OF POWER · AN ESSAY

The Architect Phase

An essay on a phase

The Founding Caught on Paper

The essay preceding this one used the Islamic State as a modern laboratory for an old constraint. This one uses it for something larger, because the case deserves it: ISIS is a microcosm — compressed, accelerated, and uniquely documented — of the founding of advanced civilisation itself. Strip the contemporary horror to its structure and the inventory is this collection's oldest list: a floor of force, established by conquest and massacre; a managed belief fitted over the floor, to convert the conquest into a state; an extraction system, a court system, a currency, a census; and a leadership that knew — *demonstrably* knew, in its own handwriting — exactly what it was assembling and why. The captured planning files of the ex-intelligence colonel who architected the thing are organisational charts for a durable hierarchy: the informant networks first, then the land, then the sharia courts and the appointed sheikhs, the word fitted over the floor like roofing — a Ba'athist security professional's checklist for building what this project spends its volumes excavating. The files are repellent. They are also, for the historian of power, almost without price — because they are the only complete archive in existence of a durable hierarchy's *architect phase*: the construction documents of a founding, captured before the builders could die, win, or burn them.

And their value lies precisely in what they let us correct about every founding whose documents did not survive — which is all of them. The ancient orders this collection studies present themselves, in their own records, as organic: immemorial, ordained, grown rather than built, their kings descended from gods and their laws received rather than drafted. The presentation is not exactly a lie. It is a *survivorship*: foundings are violent, improvised and instrumentally clear-eyed while they happen, and then the founders die, the files burn or are rewritten, and the inheritors — the essay comes to them — sincerely cannot imagine the edifice was ever scaffolding. ISIS died young, in the architect phase, with the scaffolding still up and the memos still in the folder; and so it shows us, in documentary nakedness, the phase that every Sassanid court, every Cordoba, every Norman Palermo passed through and then deleted. The colonel's folder is the fossil bed of foundings — the soft parts, preserved.

Architects and Inheritors, Restored

The distinction this reading requires once lived in the project's framework and was dropped, for a defect worth naming because correcting it restores the tool. The old version treated *architect* and *inheritor* as

generations — the founders design, everyone after receives — and the scheme collapsed into a caste system too black-and-white for the record, in which every second-generation ruler became, by definition, a sleepwalker. The corrected version treats them as *modes*, not castes. The architect mode is the instrumental relation to the word: the operator who knows the belief is a component — who selects it, fits it, budgets for its clergy, and can read his own structure from outside, as the colonel's files read theirs. The inheritor mode is the formed relation: the operator who received the word as furniture — installed in childhood, prior to evaluation — and who governs *inside* it sincerely, maintaining what he cannot see as built. Most rulers in the record hold power in the inheritor mode; that is what dynasties are for. But inheritance does not foreclose architecture: an inheritor can step into the architect mode — can grasp some piece of the structure as structure, and redesign it — and the collection's files are punctuated by exactly these men: Abd al-Rahman III inheriting an emirate and architecting a caliphate when a rival word forced his hand; the Tokugawa inheriting Hideyoshi's settlement and architecting the freeze; Constantine inheriting an empire whose old word was failing and executing the largest materials-at-hand retrofit in recorded history. And the modes can nest, in the limit case, inside a single performance: Augustus, the most complete architect in the ancient record, whose design's central specification was that it must *appear to be an inheritance* — the republic restored, the old forms kept, the revolution dressed as furniture from the first day. The distinction, restored as a pair of modes with traffic between them, stops being a caste system and becomes a diagnostic: of any ruler and any institution, the project can now ask not *which generation is this?* but *in which mode is the word being held?* — and the answer is usually legible in conduct, which is where this project reads everything.

The transition between the modes — how a structure built in full instrumental daylight becomes furniture no one remembers building — is not mysterious, because the collection has owned the mechanism since its first volume: it is *formation, operating on the elite itself*. The architects' own grandchildren are raised inside the word the architects fitted; the hagiography commissioned as propaganda is the only history the third generation ever hears; and the Moses dynamic — the founder's situated improvisations canonised and inherited as eternal law — is precisely this transition, viewed from the canon's side. The architects build the room. Formation makes it furniture. The furniture then governs the inheritors as firmly as it governs the peasantry — which is why mature orders are so stable and so blind, and why the men who can still see the structure as structure tend to appear, as an earlier essay in this collection found, only when the world comes back into play.

Violence First

The sequence within the architect phase has an order, and the commissioning insight states it without sentimentality: everything, at the end of the day, rests on military capacity. The floor is poured first, and it is poured in blood — enemies defeated, land conquered, rivals exterminated, and the first generation of the subjugated coerced, because there is no other way to govern a first generation: the word has had no time to work, formation needs a childhood to operate on, and the only believers available are the conquerors' own. ISIS ran the sequence in textbook order — the military conquests of 2014, the massacres that advertised the floor's reality, the security apparatus before the sharia courts, the courts before the schools; the schools were for the generation the word was going to govern, had the state lived. The collection's deep cases ran it identically at slower speed: the armies of 711 preceded the dhimma's paperwork; the Norman lances preceded Melfi by a generation; and in every case the load shifted along the same curve — force carrying everything in year one, belief carrying more with each formed cohort, until the mature order rests on a floor

it almost never has to show. The architect phase is the steep, expensive, violent end of that curve. No order in the files skipped it. The ones that look as if they did are the ones whose year-one is undocumented.

The Materials at Hand

Then the word — and here the architect faces a procurement decision the collection can now state as a law, because the files agree wherever files exist: *it is always cheaper to retrofit an existing belief than to mint a new one*, and the reason is the slow ingredient. A floor can be poured in a campaigning season. A formed population — the thing a word needs to be load-bearing — cannot be manufactured in less than a generation, because formation works on children; and an architect who commissions a new word from scratch is therefore signing up to decades of coercion while the first formed cohorts grow, against believers of the old words who are formed *already*. So architects shop the standing inventory. The colonel's files are explicit on the point in their own idiom — the population of the conquest zone was Muslim already, the formation was installed, the grievances of Sunni Iraq were standing fuel, and the design therefore specified sharia sheikhs and a caliphate rather than a Ba'athist restoration nobody believed in: the builders of a new state reaching, as builders always reach, for the load-bearing material already on site. Constantine reached the same way — an empire whose official word was visibly failing, retrofitted with the fastest-forming belief in it rather than a court invention; the popes at Melfi sold, and the Normans bought, a word with six formed centuries behind it; and the rare architects who did mint substantially new words paid the predicted invoice: Ibn Tumart, fitting a genuinely novel doctrine over the Atlas tribes, had to install it by the tamyiz — the purge of his own followers by the thousand — because a word without formed believers must be enforced on exactly the people it cannot yet hold. New words happen; the collection's files contain their successes; and every success took generations, oceans of coercion, or both — which is why the architect's procurement decision, run honestly, nearly always returns the answer the colonel's did: *work with what they already believe.*

The Tension Installed at the Foundation

The retrofit, however, ships with a clause no architect has ever deleted, and the commissioning insight names it as the design's permanent feature rather than its flaw: the floor and the word require *different trades*, and the trades do not merge. The violence apex needs the word performed by men credentialed in it — and credentialing is exactly what the apex cannot do for itself: a sharia court staffed by colonels convinces no one; the sheikhs must be real, trained, recognisable to the formed population as the genuine article, or the word does not carry. So the architects recruit an interpreter class — and the recruits, the essay before this one established and the bracket forbids us to sort, arrive in every interior condition at once: devout men making what they privately price as a deal with the devil, the ends justifying the means for the faith's larger good; ambitious men pricing the new state's pulpits; true believers in the project entire; cynics with credentials. It does not matter — that is the bracket's standing finding — because the function is identical and the *structure* is identical: from the first day, the new order contains two elites, unified in the founding and divided by trade — one holding the violence and needing the blessing, one holding the blessing and owning no division — and neither able to absorb the other. The colonels cannot openly defy the caliph they manufactured, because the army's believers watch — the audit of the faithful, already running at generation zero; the caliph cannot dispense with the colonels, because a blessing has no battalions. The reader has met this geometry at full historical scale — it is Cordoba's emirs and ulama, the Norman kings and the popes, the throne and the examination clerisy — and the essay's point is its *origin*: the tension is not a corruption that creeps into

mature orders. It is poured at the foundation, by the procurement decision itself, and the appointed sheikhs of the architect phase are the constraining ulama of the inheritor phase with nothing added but time and formation. The colonel's manufactured clerics, had the state lived, would have buried the colonel's successors under fatwas — sincerely, their own formation by then complete — and the violence apex's grandsons would have needed their blessing for every war.

The Three-Hundred-Year Test

Run, then, the commissioning thought experiment, with the honesty it invites: the Islamic State survives three hundred years. The reader of this collection can write the future history unaided. The conquest generation dies; the schools the architects specified do their work; the caliphate's second and third cohorts are formed believers of the order's own rite, for whom the order is not a project but the weather. The hagiography — commissioned, like all hagiography, in the architect phase as propaganda — becomes the only surviving account: the founding re-told as restoration, the conquests as deliverance ordained, the first caliph as a saint discovered rather than a front-man produced. The colonels are deleted — not by conspiracy but by the ordinary operation of archives that serve the word: no formed historian of the mature order could write, or believe, or *find the documents to suspect*, that the founding sharia courts were staffed to a security service's organisational chart. And the population of the order's third century simply *is* something — what it means, as the insight put it, to be Syrian under whatever name the order gave its ground: an identity, a furniture, a fact about the world that was once a colonel's memo.

This would be speculation, except that the experiment has a control — and it is the one the commissioning insight reached for by instinct. The Sassanid empire is the ancient order whose record, almost uniquely, preserves *both halves* of the operation. From the architect phase itself survive the rock inscriptions of Kartir: a priest who served four kings of the new dynasty across the third century, the only commoner in the empire's history granted inscriptions of his own, and who used them to narrate — in the first person, king by king, promotion by promotion — his construction of the Zoroastrian state church: the fire temples founded, the orthodoxy codified, the priesthood organised under his offices, the empire's rival faiths — he lists them — struck down, the prophet Mani delivered to prison and death. It is the colonel's folder in stone: the interpreter class being *built*, by a named builder, on commission from a violence apex that had just conquered its floor and was fitting a word over it from the materials at hand — Zoroastrianism was the standing formation of the Iranian plateau, and the new dynasty of upstart provincial kings retrofitted it into a legitimating apparatus exactly as the procurement law predicts. And from three centuries later survives the other half: the Letter of Tansar — a sixth-century court production, dressed as a third-century document, in which the founding is re-told precisely as the thought experiment requires: the previous dynasty as corrupt and heretical, the founder Ardashir as the *restorer* of an eternal faith to its firm foundation, and the constructed church-state declared a fact of nature in a sentence the mature order carved into its self-understanding — *church and state were born of the one womb* — never built, never fitted, never commissioned: born. The architect's memos and the inheritors' hagiography, from one empire, three centuries apart: the deletion of the colonels, performed in the open, datable, with both documents on the table. The Sassanid case is not an analogy for what would have become of ISIS. It is the completed experiment — and the discipline it teaches the reader of all ancient history is the essay's last finding: *the absence of architect-phase files is not evidence of an organic founding. It is evidence of a successful one.*

❧

The Close

The counter-position, held where the project holds them: perhaps the modern, self-conscious, file-keeping state-builder differs in kind from the ancient founder — perhaps the colonel's instrumental clarity is a product of the bureaucratic age, and the deep past really did accrete its orders half-asleep. The essay concedes that the *paper* is modern, and answers with the rocks: wherever the deep past left files at all — Kartir's inscriptions, the Asturian chroniclers manufacturing a Visigothic pedigree for a mountain dynasty, the court historians of every founder this collection has audited — the files show design: situated men in structural positions, solving the standing problems with the materials at hand, and commissioning, as their final deliverable, the story that there had been no design. Accretion is what architecture looks like after the scaffolding is burned; the ordained is the engineered, plus three formed generations; and the bracket performs here its last and largest service, for the architect phase is exactly where the question of sincerity tempts hardest and matters least — the devout cleric striking his bargain, the cynical colonel drafting his charts, and the believing volunteer dying at the checkpoint are building, with whatever is in their three locked rooms, the same building; and in three hundred years the building is all that remains, furniture in the room of people not yet born, who will be formed inside it, and will call it the way things are, and will be right. Tested — never revealed.

A Note on Sources

An essay's sources can be stated briefly. The Islamic State material rests on the captured planning files of Samir al-Khlifawi ("Haji Bakr") as reported by Christoph Reuter in Der Spiegel ("The Terror Strategist," 2015), with the scholarship on the organisation's ex-Ba'athist stratum cited in this essay's companion, The Audit of the Faithful. The Sassanid control case rests on the inscriptions of Kartir — Ka'ba-ye Zartosht, Naqsh-e Rustam, Sar Mashhad, Naqsh-e Rajab — as edited and analysed in the scholarly literature (Skjærvø's and Gignoux's studies; the Encyclopaedia Iranica synthesis), and on the Letter of Tansar, the sixth-century legitimating document preserved in Ibn Isfandiyar's history, in Mary Boyce's translation and analysis, from which the sentence quoted is taken. The medieval and early-modern cases invoked — the dhimma's paperwork, Melfi, Ibn Tumart's tamyiz, the Asturian chronicles, Abd al-Rahman III, the Tokugawa settlement — are documented, with their sources and flags, in the volumes of this collection where each appears. The architect/inheritor distinction is restored here, in corrected form, from an earlier stratum of the project's own framework; the procurement law, the modes, and the three-hundred-year test belong to the Patterns of Power project and its commissioning insights, and are held, like everything the project holds, as tested, never revealed.